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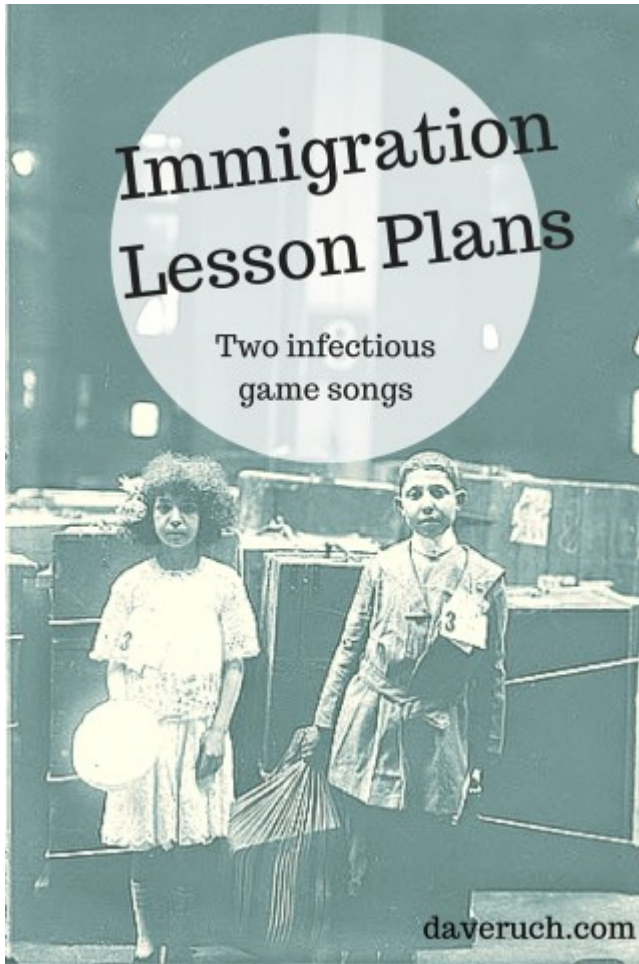
September 1, 2015

Immigration Lesson Plans

Some ideas for the K-8 teacher

I guess it was about twelve years ago when I first started working on my [“Immigration Songs and Stories” program](#) for elementary and middle school students.

At the time, the New York State Social Studies Curriculum included a significant unit on Immigration to America at the Grade 5 level, and since I've always enjoyed connecting history with music, this was a natural for me. (In addition to performing [school assemblies](#), I especially love to work with individual grades and really drill down into the social studies and non-fiction ELA content they're working on, using authentic music along with stories and humor to pull them laughing, singing and moving into the material.)



It dawned on me recently that some of the things I do within my immigration program are things that *you*, the classroom or social studies teacher, can use with your students immediately, without me, and regardless of how musical or non-musical you may feel!

Elementary or middle school, 4th Grade, 5th Grade, 2nd Grade, 8th Grade – – it really doesn't matter; **they'll love this.**

We hear so much about cross-curricular lesson plans and [differentiated instruction](#) these days, and yet, you may find yourself with very little time or extra energy to devote to it.

So, I offer these two quick and easy musical games in hopes that you can incorporate them into one of your immigration lesson plans.

Immigration Lesson Plans can be musical!

The “primary source document” we’re going to use is the old song “*My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean*.” If we analyze the lyrics, and we take the time to discuss just exactly [what a “bonnie” might be](#) (as a kid, I was sure it was “My BODY lies over the ocean...”), we discover that this can be thought of as a song of immigration, with the singer’s loved one (or “bonnie”) on one side of the ocean, and the singer on the other. This can lead you right into a discussion with your students about how, very often, it was the man who would strike out first for America, on his own, sending money back to the family until they had saved enough to make the long journey here to be reunited (sometimes a dozen or more years later).

Here are the lyrics:

*My bonnie lies over the ocean
My bonnie lies over the sea
My bonnie lies over the ocean
So bring back my bonnie to me*

*Bring back, bring back
Bring back my bonnie to me, to me
Bring back, bring back
Oh, bring back my bonnie to me*

Now, the real fun comes when you play the game (and I would suggest playing the game first, then circling back for discussion and all the teachable moments, then most likely playing the game again, since students will definitely be asking for more).

Game #1

1. Divide students into two groups (at just about any age, boys vs. girls can really spike the engagement level!)
2. Choose one group to go first, and instruct them to simply stand up when they hear the first word in the song that begins with the letter “B,” then sit down when they hear the next one, stand on the next one, and so forth. Explain that the goal is to stay together as a group (they won’t) and everyone ends up in the right place at the end (they won’t!).
3. Start the game by singing the song, or recruiting the entire class to sing it with you (they will drown you out), or playing a recording of the song if you don’t want to sing it yourself. Generally, by the time you get to the fourth line, some students will be standing and some will be sitting. You can simply tell them gently that they failed to win the game at that point, and move on to group #2. Mass laughter will ensue, and now the competition is really on.

Here’s a video clip of step #3 in action – – this is just after the first group (girls) fell apart, and starts as the second group (boys) attempt to win the game:

4. Repeat step #3 with the second group, who will fail just like the first group did. I promise. (See video above.)
5. At that point, I usually have all the teachers in the room become the third group, and those “experts” show the kids how to win the game (they won’t either!). However, since you’ll likely not have a critical mass of adults in your room, it’s time for you to show the students how to win the game. Repeat step #3 once more, this time with both groups playing at the same time and you raising and lowering your arm to show students where they should be standing or sitting. (You will have to practice for a few minutes ahead of time, because the odd number of “B” words in the “Bring back my Bonnie” lines is where people always stumble.)

Here’s How to Win the Game

(up)

My Bonnie lies over the ocean

(down)

My Bonnie lies over the sea

(up)

My Bonnie lies over the ocean

(down)(up) (down)

So bring back my Bonnie to me

(up) (down)(up) (down)

Bring back, bring back

(up) (down) (up)

Bring back my Bonnie to me, to me

(down)(up) (down)(up)

Bring back, bring back

(down)(up) (down)

Bring back my Bonnie to me

The Second Game

As an alternative to the first game (you won't *always* want that much adrenaline rushing through your immigration lessons), or as an add-on if you've got time after the first one, challenge students individually or as a group to *sing* the song but leave a blank space where all the "B" words should be.

So, it will sound like this (the brackets are the silent spaces):

My () lies over the ocean

My () lies over the sea

My () lies over the ocean
 So () () my () to me

() (), () ()
 () () my () to me, to me
 () (), () ()
 () () my () to me

The Long View of Immigration

When I began researching the topic of immigration all those years ago through some school texts, [Library of Congress materials](#) and a variety of other resources, I made the decision to take a very broad view in my program, starting well before the nineteenth-century Castle Garden/Ellis Island narrative.

In fact, why not start with the Native Americans? Even they started out somewhere else, ending up in North America in their search for “a better life.” Every American, without exception, has an immigrant in their family tree.

So, when I address immigration with elementary and middle school groups, I start with some music from the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) or Pawnee people (depending on where the students are located and what I’m in the mood for), and I continue through the early Europeans, [the enslaved Africans](#) (perhaps the *only* group who did not come intentionally in hopes of making a better life), and finally to the nineteenth-century with the Chinese and Japanese coming across the Pacific Ocean for work in the West, and Europeans of all stripes coming in waves throughout the century to the East Coast.

I don’t often get *past* [Ellis Island](#), chronologically speaking, because of the limits of my time with the students as a visiting artist (“can you fit your presentation into 43 minutes?,” “how many students can you see at the same time?”), but of course, the story continues to the present day and, in fact, is all over the headlines on the very day I’m writing this.

If You’d Like Me To Lead Your Students

I offer “Immigration Songs and Stories” [concert videos](#) on demand, [virtual field trips](#) for elementary students and middle schools, and [school visits](#) throughout the year in the Northeastern US and parts of the Midwest. I’d be happy to talk with you about working with your students in one of those ways.

Please do let me know how these activities go for you in the comments section below, and how you’ve plugged them in to your immigration lesson plans!

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